Peer groups are key to both professional and personal growth. Why?

By Cathy Hirko
chirko@cpbj.com

A common thread among area business leaders is their desire to seek out peer groups for advice, mentorship and personal growth.

We asked women leaders locally to share what kinds of groups they are involved in and the benefits.

What peer groups are you involved in and why?

Houser: Leadership Harrisburg Area. I had participated in Leadership Centre County prior to moving to Harrisburg and realized what a great resource it was. Pennsylvania Public Relations Society: This is a group to both learn from and potentially consult with. Pennsylvania Association for Government Relations: I joined PAGR for opportunities to network with other lobbyists and to attend events with elected officials. Women in Pennsylvania Government Relations: There were so many women in the room who do great work and are offering support to each other.

Deary: The one that stands out the most is the group of regional Leadership Program leaders who get together to share resources, ideas, strengths, and struggles. I think it’s important to be involved with organizations that share your profession and/or interests. I am a member of PANO (Pennsylvania Association of Nonprofit Organizations) and ALP (Association of Leadership Programs). I also like to participate in women’s bible studies at my church and professional development book clubs. Both groups help to hold me accountable to my own personal development.

Richardson: Women’s President’s Organization. It is incredibly helpful to get feedback from colleagues across all industries. I am also part of the JW Women of Cole cohort of female owner/advisors through our broker-dealer. J.W. Cole has been incredibly committed to the support of their female colleagues since we joined them in 2011.

Zimmerman: I’m involved in a group of nonprofit executive directors and fundraising professionals that meets quarterly. We share best practices, have educational opportunities made available to us, and network with each other. Leaders and senior staff of the area leadership programs also meet quarterly to discuss best practices, share organizational issues and concerns, and to network our organizations with each other.

Shea: Leadership committee for Pennsylvania Public Relations Society. It is a collaborative group of PR pros that gathers about once a month. Connected Women at Gannett Fleming, which works to create a culture that empowers women to achieve career and personal success at our firm. Advisory committee for the Chamber Business Women’s group at the Harrisburg Regional Chamber, which promotes the advancement of women through education.

Williams: I have been a member of Vistage for almost three years. When you bring diverse men
and women from non-competing industries together in one room, and you are vulnerable – sharing your personal and professional struggles and business-altering decisions, something amazing happens. I believe so much in the value of what I found in Vistage that I recently became a Vistage Chair and am forming a group that I will facilitate and lead.

Balepur: WPO (Women Presidents Organization) Lancaster Chapter, Commercial & Industrial Real Estate Council, I also consider the different boards that I’ve been involved with as my peer groups. I enjoy being a part of these groups for the many wonderful relationships that result. Sharing of ideas and objective, diverse opinions are important to me.

Why are peer groups important?

Williams: In the right, non-competitive group, you are surround by unbiased peers. For leaders, this is crucial. (In some peer groups) it seems everyone has an agenda. They want something from you. They want something for you. Or maybe they want to be you. In the right peer group, though, no one wants anything from you, and all they want for you is for you to succeed, both personally and professionally.

Shea: The professional and personal benefits are incalculable. As a transplanted to this area, they have provided me with connections to colleagues-turned-friends that I otherwise wouldn’t have. Active groups help you to form relationships with innovators and thought leaders in your field. Just a couple of weeks ago, I called a colleague from PPRS to talk through how she organizes the responsibilities on her team and how she prepares for growth. I needed a perspective from outside our industry, and her point of view was invaluable.

Richardson: Peer groups allow me the chance to network and collaborate with other owners and decision-makers. It helps that we can all offer feedback and growth opportunities by speaking from real experiences. These groups have given me an incredible network of professional business owners that my business uses to share ideas and collaborate with on various projects. It has also given me the confidence to step up and share my love of philanthropy, a donation to demonstrate the way trust between those who do similar work.

Shea: Last year I was programming co-chair for PPRS, and that ended up being a several-hours-a-month commitment. I was able to meet new people from around the region, direct programming towards areas of interest to me, and collaborate with other PR pros, so it was well worth the investment. I even ended up recruiting my co-chair to come to work at Gannett Fleming. I’ve been fortunate enough to be involved writing the strategic plan for Connected Women at Gannett Fleming. Being involved in the early stage of a group is a huge time commitment, but I get to be a part of something that will help women for years to come.

Richardson: I believe that you should devote at least six to 10 hours per month to get as much as possible from your group. If you only plan to attend meetings, and do not budget the additional related building time with the other members, you are only scratching the surface of the optimal value you can experience from your commitment.

Balepur: I consider time invested as valuable “me” time. Two to three hours on a monthly basis works well with my schedule.

Williams: First, I love that you’re referring to it as an investment rather than a cost, because that’s exactly what it is. If a CEO budgets $1,000 a month on social media marketing but doesn’t develop an innovative approach, then that was a waste of budget dollars. And if a CEO budgets $1,000 a month on a peer group and is able to make better decisions, grow their business two times faster than their competition, and take a real, stress-free vacation, then that’s a worthwhile investment.

Houser: It’s great to form personal relationships with people who have professional experience in your field – or in a field you think about transitioning to – it opens up the opportunity to have trusted sounding boards, to make good referrals or engage consultants, and to provide support to each other.

Deary: Whether it is personally or professionally, everyone needs to be surrounded by people who will uplift you, support you, and most importantly, challenge you.

What type of investment (in money) should you give to a peer group?

Shea: I consider time invested as valuable “me” time. Two to three hours on a monthly basis works well with my schedule.

Richardson: I believe that the amount of money you invest in your peer group should be a direct correlation to the value you experience from that group. Spending money to simply belong to a group is fruitless. Committing yourself and your time is the best way to ensure you get the most out of it as possible.

Zimmerman: As peers, we understand one another’s victories and challenges. We are able to provide feedback that those outside of our sector might not be able to. Because we represent different organizations, we also provide an outside perspective for each other. It can be easy to be too close to the work you do. Having someone else step back and provide a new perspective can be invaluable.

Houser: My answer is based on the fact that I have not been able to participate or invest in these groups as I would like to. I travel frequently but with no predictability, and that regularly means that I miss membership meetings and events. While I have made some contacts that I have come to know and rely on for advice or insight from time to time, I am aware my network would be much larger if I were able to attend regularly.

Deary: I think this could be different for everyone but as a staff of one, I can’t afford to give more than a few hours a month.

What type of investment (in money) should you give to a peer group?

Shea: I consider time invested as valuable “me” time. Two to three hours on a monthly basis works well with my schedule.

Richardson: I believe that the amount of money you invest in your peer group should be a direct correlation to the value you experience from that group. Spending money to simply belong to a group is fruitless. Committing yourself and your time is the best way to ensure you get the most out of it as possible.

Zimmerman: As peers, we understand one another’s victories and challenges. We are able to provide feedback that those outside of our sector might not be able to. Because we represent different organizations, we also provide an outside perspective for each other. It can be easy to be too